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Towards a Theory of Teacher Agency: Conceptualizing the Political Positions and Possibilities of Teacher Movements

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Abstract

In response to a need for increased engagement given the #RedForEd movement, this article draws upon my experience as an organizer and participant in the recent wave of teacher activism to provide implications for theories of teacher agency and political transformation. First, I conceptualize the Arizona #RedForEd movement's unique position beyond the state's logics of political power, considering the possibilities that such a position created for teacher-activists in Arizona. I then confront the decreasing power of the movement in order to demonstrate the need for increased theorizations of the reflexive capacities of institutionalized power structures to sustain oppositional education social movements. I consider the recent history of the RedForEd movement with the hope of forwarding renewed considerations of political transformation, power, and teacher agency, which can inform movements that challenge the hegemonic limits placed upon social-justice-oriented movement work.

Keywords: social movements, political transformation, redfored, power, teacher agency

In the last two years, teachers across the country have presented bold challenges to the austerity measures impacting their schools in the form of rallies, marches, and mass strikes. Although much emphasis has been placed on both the beginnings and results of these actions (Weiner, 2019)—commonly referred to as the #RedForEd movement—relatively little scholarship has questioned the movement's implications and the responses that it provoked from established power structures in understanding teacher agency and political transformation in the United States. In this essay, I seek to draw from my personal experience as a co-founder of Arizona Educators United, the activist network that helped lead the six-day Arizona teacher strike, to provide implications for such understandings of teacher activism and power in the United States.

To begin, I contextualize this analysis by discussing the political position that allowed Arizona teachers to develop a new political structure capable of building a multi-faceted movement and mobilizing over 110,000 people. Following this, I consider Noah De Lissoy's (2010) theory of openings in hegemonic power to show how this unique position created a new, effective space for

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exploiting such openings and, in consequence, possibilities for political transformation in Arizona. However, as Arizona's case demonstrates, the reflexivity of power and its ability to maneuver in new, intricate ways allowed these very same exploited openings to rapidly disappear as the movement became institutionalized and identified with the state's dominant political logic. As a result, the nebulous movement space that Arizona Educators United held was initially effective—as it operated beyond the grasp of the normative political logic—but became increasingly ineffective due to both the structured political space and the adaptive, responsive capacities of power.

It is not my intent to use this analysis as a critique of fellow movement leaders or the efforts of the #RedForEd movement. Rather, I mobilize my experience in Arizona to shed light upon the political structures that shape social movements in the United States and present implications for understanding teacher movements, teacher agency, and political transformation. By doing so, scholars and activists can recognize the realities of recent mobilizations as they begin to challenge the hegemonic limits of power, transcend liberal definitions of teacher agency, and gravitate towards radical new possibilities of contention and transformation.

Existing Beyond and Between: Arizona Educators United

To understand the implications of the #RedForEd movement, we must first situate the movement within the political space that it occupies. In Arizona—a conservative right-to-work state—the origins of the #RedForEd movement were developed largely through social media, external to any established political presence in the state. The movement existed primarily within a Facebook group called Arizona Educators United, which functioned as a virtual organizing space where activists can plan and converse. Due to a lack of stated political ideology, the group was able to use Facebook to organize efforts from over 60,000 politically diverse education-activists across the state.

Arizona Educators United—a new organization, existing largely outside of established political power—was unable to be understood with the same logic that was applied to organized workers, social movements, or progressive politics in Arizona. Whereas past efforts of teacher activism in Arizona were often quickly weakened by standard political attacks, such as associating the actions with socialism or the Democratic Party, this new group was difficult to identify as it existed primarily on social media and lacked many of the hallmarks of past movements (Campbell, 2018), like distinct leadership and political ideology. Consequently, Arizona Educators United and the #RedForEd movement were initially immune to the categorizations that have typically rendered social movements ineffective in conservative, right-to-work states such as Arizona. As a result of this ability to exist beyond these frameworks, the movement occupied a nebulous, relatively open space within Arizona's political structure. Ultimately, this positioned #RedForEd with a unique capacity to quickly amass political capital.

Openings in Power and the Drift Towards Institutionalization

This capacity, however, was not realized simply through Arizona Educators United's position, but more specifically through the ability to exploit the openings (De Lissoy, 2010), or unprotected gaps within power structures that can be leveraged to effect change. Due to the #RedForEd movement's status as a new entity outside of the typical patterns of contention and political logic in Arizona, it was difficult for established power structures to identify and react to the movement. As a result of having no uniform political ideology across membership, a largely undefined leadership, no external affiliations, and no past history, typical reactions to social movements were ineffective. This bolstered Arizona Educators United and the #RedForEd movement's unique capacity to maneuver within and through the gaps of power (De Lissoy, 2010). Consequently, the movement presented a challenge to neoliberal ideology in Arizona and amassed considerable political capital as evidenced by large mobilizations (Jones, 2018) and winning political demands (Rios, 2018).

However, even within such a position, the movement was by no means free of the limitations of institutionalized political structures in Arizona. Within this between space that the movement occupied existed a predetermined landscape constructed by past social movements and political possibilities, which

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informed #RedForEd's actions. Through mobilizing Tilly's (2013) theory of social movements and the repeated usage of standardized "contentious performances," (p. 4)—which includes strategies repeated throughout the history of resistance, like marches—it becomes clear that although the Arizona #RedForEd movement existed in a new form, it also continued to practice a standard repertoire of contention informed by past movements. Following its organic formation through social media spaces and digital organizing efforts, #RedForEd quickly embraced the standard repertoire of contention that Tilly outlined, such as protests, identical T-shirts, and mass strikes.

Further, the Arizona #RedForEd movement began to adopt other practices of social movements beyond mobilization tactics, such as developing clear leadership and political affiliations, pushing further towards a framework of traditional social movements. Consequently, this shift caused #RedForEd to be far more easily associated with prior movements, and the organization folded into the logic of Arizona's political landscape. Throughout this process, the #RedForEd movement began reflecting the historical memories of past movements as it simultaneously began sacrificing its opportunity to further exploit its position as a new, flexible political structure capable of seizing upon gaps in institutionalized, hegemonic power.

In addition to the historical context influencing the decisions and tactics of the movement, there existed a very tangible understanding of the limits of contention, or what was possible for a social movement in a red state. As one teacher-organizer put it during a discussion on centering race, gender, and common good in our demands: "We just can't do that here. Arizona isn't ready for that." This tacit logic dominated the decisions made in Arizona despite many of the organizers, myself included, stated goal of social-justice-oriented movement work. This demonstrates that, despite its initial existence outside of the political logics of Arizona, the movement still embraced the tactics of past movements and the inherently understood political limits that exist in the state. There seemed to be an almost unspoken, self-disciplined understanding among activists that some topics and actions were simply off limits.

The movement began to protect itself from crossing the limits of contention, and this resulted in a loss of political capital. The organization consolidated representation, decision-making, and affiliations. Throughout this process, movement leaders became easily identifiable, affiliations with the Arizona Education Association—the state teacher's union—became apparent, and decision-making slowed down as it simultaneously shifted towards a top-down approach. Although originally difficult to identify and articulate, the movement began drifting towards the trends of past movements as it was rapidly integrated into the dominant political logic of Arizona.

Once the movement became similar to other social movements, opponents, such as conservative legislators and political organizations, seized upon the opportunity to place #RedForEd even further within Arizona's political landscape. One striking example is the governor's statement that the movement was "political theater" (para. 1), and that it had endorsed his opponent in the Governor's race—attributing an action that the state teachers union had taken to the #RedforEd movement and Arizona Educators United (Welch, 2018). Clearly, this statement implies an overall lack of credibility, as well as a deliberate conflation of the union's actions with the newly established grassroots organization in order to place the movement within partisan frameworks and anti-union ideologies. In response to statements such as this, as well as the movement's drift towards institutionalization, many people quickly began identifying the movement less with teachers and more with the Democratic Party and progressive politics. Through this process, Arizona Educators United, along with it the #RedForEd movement in Arizona, began evacuating the nebulous spaces it once occupied and instead became located in the logic and historical memory of Arizona politics.

Once it became located within these standard political logics of Arizona, the movement was subjected to increased attacks and political precarity. In such a position, activists had to respond not only to rhetorical attacks but also to tangible confrontations with the responsive capacities of power structures, such as the Arizona Supreme Court and governor's office. For example, a few months after the six-day strike, the movement's progressive funding initiative, #InvestInEd, was controversially removed from the ballot by the Arizona Supreme Court (Altavena, 2018). In response, driven by the hope of furthering the

movement despite a large setback, #RedForEd leaders and activists called upon political candidates to endorse the movement's demands. After endorsing the demands, both the union and Arizona Educators United agreed that they would support candidates through door-knocking efforts. Movement leaders considered this to be an effective way to move demands forward following the walkout and given that the hope for meeting all demands through a ballot initiative was now gone. However, a deep fracturing of the movement occurred as partisan lines were further developed, and focus shifted from collective demands and towards standard models of electoral activism.

Although a process of institutionalization and consequent reframing of the teacher movement continued through actions like this, the ability to claim the unoccupied spaces in Arizona's political landscape and to exploit the gaps that previously existed disintegrated. As a result, the #RedForEd movement was rendered much less effective in a matter of only months. Whereas the initial victories of the movement, such as large mobilizations and significant gains in education funding, were tangible (Roberts, 2018), the consequential shift in Arizona Educators United's position resulted in a considerable decrease in membership, participation, and political capital (Ruelas & Cano, 2018). Consequently, the #RedForEd movement in Arizona, though in many ways successful, can be understood as a testament to the dire need for a deeper understanding of teacher agency, movement organizations' drift towards institutionalization (Tarlau, 2019), and a theory of power that recognizes the deterministic and reflexive capacities of the political structures impacting teacher movements.

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Understanding the #RedForEd movement within this framework ultimately points less to a clear-cut victory for education activists and unions in the United States, and more towards the intricate, delicate nature of movement work and the political structures in which it takes place. Such an understanding requires a shift away from analyses of how the movement began or functioned, and instead towards the need for reconceptualizing teacher agency, political possibilities, and the limits that hegemonic structures of power place upon teacher-activism.

Further, these understandings have become more relevant following the *Janus* Supreme Court decision (*Janus v. State, County, and Municipal Employees*, 2018), which effectively placed all states under right-to-work legislation and positioned newly established grassroots organizations, such as Arizona Educators United or California Educators Rising, as increasingly important spaces of teacher activism. Along with this uptick in new forms of teacher organizing, the *Janus* ruling has also created a need for teachers' unions to develop bold new strategies of transformation and mobilization.

It is important to also recognize that such an analysis can be extended beyond the structural-spatial conceptualizations. Understanding these structures and the capacity of established political power helps us to not only conceptualize how the movement existed within political space, but also how the movement, political power in Arizona, and the structures it co-created impacted the activists.

For example, as teachers like myself gained political capital, we also, paradoxically, lost political agency. As I was increasingly bound by political affiliations and the limits of contention outlined above, a fear of losing any of the movement's political capital developed. As a result, the possibilities of my own personal actions become increasingly limited. To retain the organization's political capital, I sacrificed individual agency in order to fit the conceptions produced through the movement and the political discourse that it generated. Much like Ian Hacking's (2002) notion of dynamic nominalism—which suggests that as categories are developed to define a certain way of being, the people who inhabit such categories are also brought into being—my political being became constructed through the discourse, identities, and boundaries of the movement.

As a result of these processes, my personal agency and even political commitments shifted. Understanding the effect upon agency as both produced by and within structural conditions allows us to not only understand #RedForEd's initial effectiveness and drift towards institutionalization, but to also understand the historically informed, cyclical processes acting upon and defining political possibilities and agency. Through patterns of contention, boundaries of the *possible*, and political discourse, the movement develops activists while the activists develop the movement.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is important to first reiterate my own positionality within the movement and the organization that I analyzed in this article. My own perspective is, of course, skewed due to my deep involvement with #RedForEd and Arizona Educators United. Although the analysis and implications throughout this article are largely written from the viewpoint of an outside observer for the sake of clarity, they should be understood as subjective. I am uninterested in offering a definitive theory of agency and power. Rather, my interest lies in blurring the line between activist and scholar, participant and observer, as I mobilize my experiences to offer a conceptualization of teacher agency that reconsiders normative conceptions of agency, transformation, and education activism.

With this in mind, I suggest several implications. First, it is important that education scholars and activists recognize the dynamic possibilities of occupying the neutral, fluid spaces that exist beyond standard structures of political power. Arizona's movement began in this space as a nebulous, flexible entity that was capable of democratic membership engagement and large mobilizations, which could exploit the rapidly shifting openings in power. And Arizona is by no means an exception in accomplishing this, as similar groups across the United States have as well. Successful cases can also be seen in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, and numerous other states where social media spaces have offered a form of teacher organizing beyond unions, official leadership, and political parties.

Second, it is important to simultaneously recognize that although these movements were successful at initially occupying these spaces and exploiting perceived openings in political power structures, they were ultimately worked back within the dominant political logic and historical tendencies of social movements in Arizona. This tendency limited the possibilities of the movement while simultaneously allowing established political structures to respond, removing openings within power and eliminating the potential for further, large-scale successes. Again, we saw common patterns in Arizona, Oklahoma, and West Virginia, such as the tensions between Oklahoma's grassroots activists and union leaders and the bitter end to their strike (Antonucci, 2018). West Virginia activists defeated a school privatization bill twice, and then lost the very same battle a few months later (Adams, 2019; Schwartz, 2019). All of these efforts attest to the reflexive abilities of power structures. We have also seen new organizations drift towards institutionalization as leadership becomes defined, political identities are developed, and claims to the neutral space they once occupied are rendered illegitimate.

Finally, there is a clear implication for scholars and movement activists to study the tactics that #RedForEd uses to assess wins and losses of the movement and also to theorize the reflexivity of power structures and political logics used to understand, respond to, and constrain the recent teacher movements. Importantly, we must also recognize that these realities do not exist in political, theoretical vacuums. With the tensions produced as organic movement work drifted towards institutionalization, along with shifts in the political discourse, what is possible begins to be mediated by forces external to the teacher, demanding a reconceptualization of teacher-activist agency.

This analysis suggests the need for renewed conceptions of power and agency in a shifting, post-digital political landscape, as well as a bold re-envisioning of what a social movement, or even pedagogy, in the openings of political power may look like. As a result, we can begin to develop new theories of teacher agency, power, and transformation in the United States. Better understanding these forces and possibilities will allow us to challenge the limitations of hegemonic power and the confines of past movements in order to create bold, new approaches to political praxis and transformation.

Author Biography

Noah Karvelis is a PhD student at the University of Madison-Wisconsin and a former elementary music teacher. His research focuses on how political futures are made present, possible or radically impossible through schooling.

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